Political Acts and Terrorism: A New Analysis

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What is the difference between a political act and an act of terrorism? Why is it that most of us have a strong feeling that these two areas of analysis coincide on a level, even if we have difficulty articulating it?[2] Recent feminist work in political theory has often made the point that the gender-based accounts of ethics of past years have something to offer political thought, but the area of what is constitutive of terrorism and responses to it remains underinvestigated.

Before beginning an analysis of what might be meant by the phrase "terrorism"—and how this would differ from some other political acts—it is important to try to spell out the history of feminist concerns for peace. Women's interventions into the peace movement (which itself, at least in some guise, is associated with second-wave feminism) have a lengthy history, and it is clear that a great deal of work has been done not only on what makes for peace efforts, but what constitutes the very sorts of violence and war-related efforts that drive peace movements in the first place. Elise Boulding has written of the history of this work, and she notes:

> Between 1820 and 1830, the first all-women national peace societies were

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2 For recent work with a general feminist slant on violence in its various ramifications and its intersection with other issues, see *Women and Violence*. eds. Stanley G. French, Wanda Teays and Laura Purdy, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. For social theory and feminism, which is, of course, relevant to these issues, see Brooke Ackerly, *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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> founded in England and America, and by 1852 the Olive Leaf Circles were issuing the first international women's publication, *Sisterly Voices*…. By the time of the establishment of the short-lived Paris Commune in 1871 many women had apprenticed themselves to the new internationalism….By the 1880's and 1890's, the vision of an international socialist community based on non-violence…was being articulated….[3]

Although we can trace the trajectory of peace efforts by women, we need further information on how women's thought today interacts with our conceptions of terrorism and politically-inspired activities of violence. We need to see how the interstices between these areas work.

1.

Terrorism is best thought of as a network of beliefs that, when promulgated and acted upon, attempt to change minds and convert actions by way of fear – intense fear. We think of terrorism on a global scale as involving attacks on civilians, on modes of travel, and on public places that are not ordinarily associated with the military or military endeavors. The difficulty with taking a stand on terrorism revolves around the extent to which the violence is motivated and planned, and also the extent to which it involves issues that themselves may not appear progressive. When progressive social issues are pushed forward, in some cases with acts of violence, the problematic then becomes one of separating the intent from what has occurred, and taking stock of the long-term goals.

Some of the lines of argument that have been adduced in this context have a great deal to do with the overall concepts of political action, demonstration, and response. Our first reaction to the notion that examining terrorism as a construct has something to do with the allegedly or purportedly non-violent activities of protest is to maintain that there is no link, but a closer examination reveals that we exclude terror largely on the basis of a construction of peace-related activities. Indeed, recent work in these areas has revealed that some of what has taken place in the U.S. and other developed nations over the past decade or so more or less straddles the area between these two extreme and opposing tendencies—an example that readily comes to mind is that of the "Occupy" movement.

If we can demarcate at least two extremes – one involving the obvious examples of interfering with air travel, planting bombs or explosives in subway and train stations, and executing random attacks on civilians, and

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3 Elise Boulding, *Women in the Twentieth Century*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977, pp. 169-70.

the other more-or-less peaceful demonstrations that have gotten out of hand – we can come to grips with important notions. For the first set of examples involves strategic planning about incidents which involve potential death or severe injury; whatever the motivation, we are tempted to think that the behavior is morally reprehensible, and that there is no excuse for the acts in question. In the second case, the situation becomes much more difficult to analyze or use for conceptualization purposes. Certain demonstrations may already have a small potential for violence – during the '60's, for example, the throwing of rocks and bottles at political demonstrations was a common occurrence. The question then becomes one of line-drawing; once objects are thrown, how do we delineate between peaceful demonstration and attempted acts of fear and intimidation?

This question would seem to be of most importance for the developed nations, since it is clear that the infrastructure needed to yield sustained struggle of the sign-carrying and demonstrating type is usually available only where there are other goods and services. But there is also the sort of terrorism that does not manifest itself so much in short bursts, as in long-term, continuous attempts at damage. Consider the following description of damage done by Boko Haram in Nigeria in the recent past, as articulated in a recent issue of *The Economist*:

> The marks of terrorist rule start to appear a couple of hundred kilometres north of Yola, capital of Nigeria's Adamawa state. Bombed churches and burned-out political offices sit decaying in Hong, one of the most southern towns taken by Boko Haram.[4]

The siege of this area by Boko is clearly a long-term effort; despite some episodes of sporadic violence, the terror clearly lies in the disruption of day to day activities.

In other words, what is normally categorized as "terrorism" can take many forms, and not all of them are easily characterized. But as noted earlier, another important point is that – at least from the standpoint of some – many of these activities are simply political activities; indeed, many will claim that action along these lines is no different from NATO taking a stand on behalf of some other group. How can we differentiate between these sorts of acts, and what it is – if anything – that feminist theory can do to elucidate some of the conceptual problems that arise?

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4 "Reclaiming Nigeria after Boko Haram," in *The Economist*. Vol. 417, No. 8962, Oct. 31-Nov. 6, 2015, p. 48. m.

In a work that has received a great deal of attention, the journalist Moustafa Bayoumi details what it means to be Muslim American in current times, and writes about assumptions with respect to terrorism and Muslims in the United States since the 9/11 attacks.[5] But remarkably, Bayoumi seems to assume, as many do, that it is completely clear what constitutes an act of terrorism, and this despite the fact that trying to challenge and fight stereotypes is the main focus of his work. In the Introduction to his work, he writes:

> [T]he national security apparatus routinely invokes the fear of terrorism, implicitly or explicitly by Muslims, to assume ever-expanding powers over American lives and to justify military intervention overseas. The image that the country is under siege by these Muslim terrorists and their sympathizers is regularly reinforced….[6]

All of the examples provided by Bayoumi as constitutive of terrorism – and many have nothing to do with any sort of conception of Islam – involve death or injury.[7] Perhaps this alone (and here we may want to count attempts at death or injury, but at this point things become somewhat vague) can help us to fill in the blanks on the notion of terror. Given that these examples and lines of argument are now crucially important in a number of places across the globe, we need both to do more conceptual work on the issues, and to see if other lines of analysis may be of assistance.

Some have alleged that demonstrations having to do with matters ecological, for example, have had a tendency to turn violent; whether this is actually the case is probably debatable, but given the notion that there is such a thing as "ecoterror," it is worth examination. In ecology, recent moves for the past several decades have already alluded to feminist theory, and there has been a tendency to advert to such theory as decisive of a number of lines of argument. Here we can take ecology as a model, and ask ourselves how feminist theory can affect our thinking on terrorism.

If feminism, in its guise as care theory, asks us for more compassion, could it possibly be of assistance with these issues?

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5 Moustafa Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life.* New York: NYU Press, 2015. A blurb on the back of the book notes that Bayoumi is "a sane voice" and offers "thoughtful commentary."

6 *Ibid*., pp. 11-12.

7 I am citing examples from the Introduction to his work, pp. 1-19. For the sake of statistical analysis, he makes the point that most cases of "terrorism" in the U.S. since 9/11have nothing to do with Muslims.

2.

Terrorism, as a set of politically-conscious and socially-charged acts, might be thought of as a response to other issues. That this is very much the case is highlighted by the view, current at least in the United States, that much of what is termed "terrorism" currently on the international scene has its origins as a reply to other acts of violence committed against developing nations or areas. A great deal of commentary, much of it extremely controversial, took place after the 9/11 incidents and gave rise to an outlook that blamed the United States, at least in part, for these very acts.[8] In other words, on this interpretation, terrorist acts are spawned by the repeated misuse of resources in the developing world, and the repeated failure to respect the inhabitants of these areas.

Whether this line of argument holds water is open to debate, but it is important to note that feminist concerns about issues such as immigration and work for peace have long maintained that much needs to be done in the way of education toward improving awareness of other cultures and of cultural constructs.[9] Part of this, or so it has been argued, has something to do with an ethics of care – if we took a more compassionate, personalized view of what was going on around us, we might be able to respond in ways that were more beneficial to those who were the objects or recipients of our attitudes. Some have maintained that an ethics of care can be developed without advertence to feminist thought, but there is no question that such theory has been at the core of many or most debates about a different sort of ethics.

The original impetus for much of what now falls under the "care" rubric has to do with the impact that was made by the work of Carol Gilligan. Although it might seem unnecessary to recount it, Gilligan's work focused on the notion that there were tendencies (sometimes the emphasis on the notion of "tendency" has been overlooked) in lines of reasoning shown by adolescent females and males having to do with ethical matters.[10] She found that what she termed the "care" voice seemed to be linked more frequently to girls, and the "justice" voice to boys. In any case, her work spawned an enormous effort at demarcating a notion of ethics that, in contradistinction to both the classical deontological lines

8 One example is that of Ward Churchill, who lost his academic job and was involved in an extensive court case partly on the basis of his having written, with respect to the attacks of September 11, 2001, that "some people fight back."

9 See *Feminist Analyses of Applied Ethics*. Totowa, MD: Lexington Books, 2015.

10 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

and the consequentialist lines, hinged on the concept of personalizing care and care obligations. The upshot of much of this work has been to ask us to examine all of our relationships – of whatever sort, including for example, our relationships to potential immigrants – in a new guise, that of whether or not we are responding to persons on an individualized or semi-individualized basis.[11]

Lines of argument have been adduced in a variety of places that attempt to tie treatment of immigrants and the general global migration problem to terrorism. In other words, part of what drives individuals to commit terrorist acts – or so the argument would go – is a lack of hospitality in the new land, or a sense that the population represented by the terrorists is being attacked by larger forces. In this sense, new work on the ethics of care can provide us with a platform or springboard from which to theorize about how different modes of interacting with those from different cultures might ameliorate some of the current problems. This is especially the case with regard to those who feel compelled, for what they claim are religious reasons, to strike back.

One might want to make the argument, then, that care has a place in all of the debates about the "other," and that notions of "otherness" are, of course, linked to at least some acts of terrorism. The difficulty is that we tend to engage in these care-related virtues only with persons who are known to us, or who at least seem to be tied to us in some way.

But we need to try to inculcate a view that sees all of us as part of a network requiring care. Virginia Held writes, with respect to these concerns:

> The ethics of care clearly implies that society must recognize its responsibilities to its children and others who are dependents, enabling the best possible bringing up and educating of its future generations, appropriate responses to its members in need of health care, and assistance with the care of dependents. It clearly implies that the members of wealthy societies must recognize their responsibilities to alleviate the hunger and gross deprivations in care afflicting so many members of poor ones.[12]

The point that Held is making here is that our overall moral obligations to assist—especially in what is known as the "Global South"—have

11 For work in this area, see fn. 8.

12 Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 159--160.

a great deal to do with possible efforts to stem terrorism, or the types of political movements that give rise to it. If terrorism feeds off of a sense that certain groups have been oppressed (and history tells us that in formerly colonial areas, for instance, this is definitely an issue), then one of the steps that we can take to try to prevent the spread of terrorism has a great deal to do with a strengthened sense of compassion.

Why be concerned about compassion and global response? There is some evidence, especially with regard to some of the recent terrorist attacks that are deemed to be "jihadist," that much of the activity fueling the attacks revolves around a perception that the culture or cultures in question are held in disrepute in the West, and that Westerners are trying to damage these cultures, or even specific geographical areas.[13] One might be tempted to term the entire group of events surrounding many of the attacks a vicious circle; no sooner does an attack occur than the calls for retaliation begin, driving further terrorist activity, and so on. Again, Bayoumi, writing from the vantage point of living in the United States, indicates how uncomfortable Muslim Americans feel with the rise in the level of rhetoric in recent years:

> Does this mean that the United States is an Islamophobic country? Of course not. Large support for American Muslims exists in many quarters. Polls may suggest that about half the population is anti-Muslim, but that leaves about half that isn't.[14]

All of the information that we have suggests that terrorism is born of certain specific needs, and there is no denying that some of those needs have to do with the interpersonal, and may not be political—or religious—in any meaningful sense. The question then becomes: how do we address issues at an earlier point, so that the motivation for terrorism does not arise? It is too simplistic and disheartening to think that there is no point in looking at the matter from this perspective, as this fails to take into account that the changing or altering of even one planned attack is a worthy endeavor. Some of what has transpired in political movements in the developed countries may be of help here.

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13 As this is written, attacks have occurred in both France and Mali. Continuous media reporting indicates that what is perceived as a lack of respect or outright dislike for the cultures in question is driving the attacks.

14 Bayoumi, *Muslim American*, p. 146.

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Writing in his work *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer tells us about a very intriguing set of circumstances having to do with ecological activism:

> In 1976…Bob Brown rafted down the Franklin River in Tasmania's Southwest. The wild beauty of the river…impressed him deeply…. Brown gave up his medical practice and founded the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, with the object of protecting the state's remaining wilderness areas….[The Wilderness Society] organized a non-violent blockade [of a road being built to a proposed dam site]. In 1982, Brown…was arrested and jailed for four days….[15]

As it happened, Brown's activities – and those with whom he was working – were deemed by some to have crossed the line into "ecoterrorism." What happened here is instructive, because it provides a model for us of what leads some activists to move from comparatively peaceful demonstrating to something larger.

Those who worked with Brown – and some comparatively recent demonstrators who engaged in "tree sitting" near the University of California at Berkeley to protest a new building – did not hesitate to throw items, obstruct movement, toss paint, and so forth. It was alleged, at least in the case of the Berkeley students, that some went further than that. Although these cases are not similar, in their severity, to international incidents, they are intriguing examples.

However one chooses to think of the path that leads to terrorism, one point seems to become clear – the activities that normally fall under that rubric tend to be engaged in when those who are making the relevant decisions feel that other paths are closed to them. Although ecological work might seem to be an example that is somewhat outside the scope of things, it is a better examplar than might initially be believed, because what we standardly take as ecologically progressive work is generally peaceful, and much of it might be deemed to be educative. In other words, or so the argument would go, if it can be shown that leafletting, demonstrating and "tree-hugging" have often turned into something that resulted in property destruction or personal injury, it is not too difficult to see how other sorts of causes might become the focus of terrorist activity at a much earlier point. With respect to the international scene, the sheer intransigence of bargainers at a negotiating table may have a great deal to do with how it is that causes turn violent.

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15 Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 257--258.

One might wonder what difference could be made, if any, in terms of the sorts of acts of terrorism driving global concern at the moment, but there is no question that an interesting fact emerges with respect, for example, to the "jihadists." It has been pointed out again and again that most of those who have engaged in acts of terrorism are actually persons of ancestry other than European (and in some few cases, they are European) who have grown up in First World countries, but who have become infuriated by the behavior exhibited toward them, and what they regard as the intolerance of the West.[16] A line of argument can be adduced – and many have tried to create arguments to this effect—that what transpires in the more developed countries is causing an attitudinal shift among the children of immigrants that is, in fact, leading to violence.

Although it might seem somewhat recondite to try to bring object relations theory to bear on this situation, one aspect of that theorizing – employed at least implicitly by Gilligan, Dinnerstein and others – is that the breaking away of the male from the mother figure at an early age has a great deal to do with male development.[17] When the young male comes to understand that he must "other" the female figures in his life, he typically also understands that core male attributes of dominance and aggression are at his disposal. For many members of first World societies, the male behavior that is required can be displayed in the classroom, the marketplace or the business world. But for members of marginalized groups, there may be no easy way to display the sorts of attributes that being a male seems to require. Thus, although it may seem strained, there is reason to believe that at least some Freudian-derived theory may have something to do with the sorts of cultural tropes that are undertaken by males in groups that feel the need to express themselves as fighting back against the dominant group. The question is: how, if at all, can this tendency be overcome?

The second wave of feminism brought with it many cultural moves to try to inculcate "sensitivity" into the young male adolescent, or to try to make it clear to growing boys that there was more than one way to be male. Although some might find these early efforts laughable, in the developed nations there is now a boom in careful parenting by fathers, gender-neutral

16 These concerns are relevant to the activities described in fn. 12.

17 In addition to Gilligan, see also the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978, and Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

toys, and other cultural tropes that signal that there is greater acceptance of new norms for "manliness." All of this – and in addition, a greater awareness of what is meant by "gender," as across-the-board cultural changes have shown – may be of some assistance in showing us how a more caring culture can alter the patterns that lead to alienation, frustration, and eventually terrorism. If it is the case that a sort of anomie is responsible for much of the growth in terror that is being manifested in the developed nations, there is an argument to be made that attention to the work of feminist theorists helps to show the way in altering that alienated space and the concomitants of it.

In the developing world, village life is still very much the norm, and although much has been written about the difficulties of village life on a day-to-day basis – lack of water, land-right problems, and so forth – it is still the case that in small villages there is a coherence between family and friends that is often lacking in other parts of the globe, or, for that matter, even in urban areas of developing nations. It may very well be this sense of coherence and focus that presents part of the difficulty for families from the less developed nations when they move into the industrialized countries. The sense of alienation and frustration is compounded by the usual difficulties, but it does not help any that the social media and various other forms of communication are even more pronounced in these areas, thus making the adjustment more difficult.

Feminist theory often invokes an ethics of care, as we have said, and that ethics may help us in deciphering ways to try to reduce the sense of helplessness, frustration and anger that seems to drive acts of terrorism, even as we of the blame these acts almost solely on political or religious factors. Just as a sense of caring for the individual may alter our stance on immigration issues – and photos, descriptive stories, and so forth can be of great assistance here – a sense of care can also assist our communities in developing the sorts of social networks that alleviate, at least to some extent, the stress that drives acts of terror.

4.

I have been arguing that contemporary analyses of terrorism – and of the place of minority cultures in certain communities, which according to some is one of the drivers of terrorism – can be assisted by advertence to feminist theory, specifically feminist ethics. Citing Bayoumi and Peter Singer, the argument has been that those who feel displaced in the developed world societies frequently are moved to commit violent acts, and that an ethics of care has something to say along these lines.

As Bayoumi has argued in *This Muslim American Life,* although it may very well be the case that many or most Americans are not anti-Muslim, it still leaves a large group of Americans who probably are.[18] Attitudes against a group may be displayed in a number of ways, and increasingly today counselors and others are using the term "microaggression" to discuss how hostility, rudeness and a sort of general anger can be displayed to individuals even without the posting of hate signs or the more overtly demonstrative moves against a group that have taken place in various cultures. When we think about the work on taking the more personalized notions of care that apply to almost all familial or close human relations and applying them to others – as Held, for one, suggests – we can come to some conclusions about how a feminist ethics of care has something to offer first world societies that are concerned about terrorism.

It represents an intriguing intersection with our earlier mention of work in ecology that ecofeminism and its various offshoots also have something to teach us in this regard. In other words, just as some of what Earth First! and other organizations have done with respect, for example, to the logging industry probably smacks of ecoterrorism, the care that we should show for our planet – at least according to some theorists – has something to do with the notion of individualized care.[19] What is meant by this sort of "whole planet" thinking is that we need to act as if the very planet itself were our neighbor, and we need to do this in a way that makes for a difference in our daily actions. So, too, do we need to incorporate an ethics of care into our notions of action toward others, even those others who belong to groups or causes in which we ourselves do not believe. Indeed, some activism current in our daily life is making use of some of these notions; those who have argued, for example, that the Confederate flag, or portions of it, needs to be removed from state flags, from buildings, and so forth, are making the argument that there is a certain hostility in the use of these symbols, and that that hostility needs to stop.

We recognize acts of terrorism when we see them, but we often have difficulty obtaining any notion of what it is that drives individuals to such acts, or how we ourselves might engage in behavior that would discourage the need for the acts. Feminist theory enjoins us to think in terms that, at least to some extent, revive the old virtue ethics of previous times. Al-

18 As we have seen, Bayoumi is very specific about this.

19 For an indigenous view that, according to many, has ramifications that can be used by ecological activists, see Steven Hirst, *I am the Grand Canyon: the Story of the Havasupai People*. Grand Canyon, AZ: Grand Canyon Association, 2006.

though the ancients may have tried to inculcate magnanimity, for instance, we can go a step further and think of the care that we exhibit to small children as being exemplary of the care that we ought to exhibit to everyone, insofar as is possible. What we are attempting to envision is a society in which individual caring precludes the response to hate, implicit or otherwise, that leads to terror.

ABSTRACT

Recent work in the ethics of care is used as a point of departure for thought about the kinds of social conditions that lead to terrorism. Allusion is made to the work of Bayoumi, Held and others, and it is concluded that political acts of terror are often a response to a climate of hostility, including microaggression.

Keywords: terrorism – microaggression – political acts – ethics of care

RESUMO

Estudos recentes sobre a ética do cuidado têm sido usados como ponto de partida para ponderar quais são os tipos de condições sociais conducentes ao terrorismo. Referem-se os trabalho de Bayoumi, Held e outros, para se concluir que os actos políticos de terror são muitas vezes uma resposta ao clima de hostilidade, nele se incluindo a micro-agressão.

Palavras-chave: terrorismo – micro-agressão – actos políticos – ética do cuidado